

## **Reviews / Comptes-rendus**

**A Toast to Baldy Red: Back Porch Ballads & Parlour Poems.** Edited by Sid Holt and George W. Lyon. Edmonton: NeWest Press. 1991. Pp. 164. ISBN 0-920897-94-0. \$12.95

Of the three pillars of folk poetry, two -- folksong and ballad -- are well-represented in folklore scholarship. Folklorists,

however, have shown only fleeting and tangential interest in the third pillar -- folk verse. Thus the chanted poetry of preliterate childhood (counting-out rhymes, rhyming taunts, nursery rhymes, dandling rhymes and the like) and the vestiges of the poetry of oral culture (praise poetry, epic, chanted sermons and, more recently, recitations) have all been given their due, but folklorists have all but ignored the major body of folk verse in 20th-Century, adult, literate society -- that is, the written poem. Whether meant to be recited or read in silence, the written poem has been part of the expressive culture of North American society for a very long time.

That folklorists have ignored this large body of work, or have left it to the usually untender mercies of literary scholars, reveals the general folkloristic aesthetic that the oral is more interesting (or significant?) than the written, that vestigial or ancient expressive forms are somehow more authentic (or satisfying?) than modern forms. In general, folklorists have ventured into the field of written poetry only when that poetry has some connection with oral performance -- as is true of recitations and cowboy poetry -- or, again, with children -- I think especially of autograph album verse.

Local poets have been documenting the life of their society for a very long time -- commemorating births, anniversaries and deaths, recounting community events, describing the local landscape, commenting on political and social topics of interest, or expressing, in poetic form, what it means to be a member of a community. Most often, this poetry remains only in manuscript, but local newspapers, local histories and vanity-press books have also been outlets for these poets. Pauline Greenhill pioneered the serious folkloristic study of this poetry in her *True Poetry* (1989), and this compilation by Holt and Lyon is perhaps the first book to show the influence of Greenhill's work.

While there have been other compilations of western local poetry -- *Wake the Prairie Echoes* (1974) and *Glistening in the Sun* (1977) come to mind -- this book is the first to see this poetry as folk expression, and the first to place such poetry in some kind of socio-political context. Holt and Lyon have compiled over 70 poems from 44 local poets from Alberta; some of the poems are parodies of songs, and meant to be sung, but most are meant to be read. The compilers accompany the poems with explanatory notes and short biographies of the poets.

The subject matter of the poetry ranges from homesteading to bootlegging, from local politics to local characters, but taken as a whole, the collection represents a good sample of the kind of poetry which I have described above. The question arises, of course, as to what separates this poetry from "élite" poetry; in other words, what is "folk" about this poetry. The compilers spend little time on this question, but I do not believe their intent was to write a learned book. Rather, their aim was to present

in a new medium (literally, to re-present) this type of poetry to the public in a serious and celebratory manner. Not an easy task, considering the legacy of Paul Hiebert's satire on such poetry, Sarah Binks (1964).

To this end, in an introduction which is much too brief for their purpose, the compilers try too hard to place the poetry within the socio-political and economic context of western Canada. While I believe that such poetry tells us much about such contexts, a six-page treatment of the issue cannot be convincing. I would have preferred to see a short description of the performance contexts for this poetry.

The compilers claim to have collected over 2,000 poems (only a very small sample, in itself), from which they made their selection. A note on their reasons for selecting these particular poems would have been a good thing; there are many more men poets than women poets represented, and almost all of the poets are from British or Irish backgrounds. There are some unfortunate errors in the notes -- mistakes which slipped the proofreader's eye -- but I will not dwell on the book's small faults. This book is a start, and a good start, towards the task of reclaiming a form of folk expressiveness which is as pervasive in western Canada as any other form of folk literature.

*Michael Taft*

**Mike Ballantyne, *Pint Pot & Plough: English Traditional Songs*, BMW 001. Available from Barley Wine Music, Box 80, Duncan, B.C. V9L 3X1.**

The unaccompanied song is a difficult form, because the materials available for maintaining the interest of the listener are few. Skilled performers in this genre can generate such interest by subtle changes of melody to accommodate the text, and by subtle shadings of tempo, dynamics and intonation to suit key points in the song. Perhaps the most important thing that a singer can do to ensure a compelling a capella performance is to choose the song wisely, because so few musical devices can be used to ornament a lifeless melody or to add significance to a weak lyric. (It is interesting to speculate on how few pop or rock tunes could be effectively performed without accompaniment or elaborate electronic talent enhancement.)

Given the difficulties of sustaining the attentive interest of the listener throughout a many-versed a capella performance, consider the more daunting task of capturing and holding an audience over an entire tape of unaccompanied song! On *Pint Pot & Plough*, Mike Ballantyne manages to do just this, and to do it with apparent ease. The reasons for the resounding

success of this recording are straightforward: these are wonderful songs, lovingly performed by a skilled and sensitive artist with a splendid voice. How can a combination like that fail?

The performances on **Pint Pot & Plough** seem to have been recorded flat; that is, no discernible reverberation or other talent-enhancers have been employed, and all the throaty richness of Ballantyne's voice is generated naturally. As a result, the lyrics can be made out very clearly. (This is an important consideration for the many listeners who will want to add these fine songs to their repertoires.) Ballantyne is able to add variety by presenting different types of voice to suit particular songs. Listen, for example, to the coarse edge to the voice used on "The Topman and the Afterguard", the silky-smooth voice used on "Artichokes and Cauliflowers" and "The Sweet Nightingale", and the broad dialect that adds to the humour of "Widdecombe Fair" and "The Mullard".

The choice of songs and their sequence on the tape have been handled superbly. The range of material includes well-known favourites such as "Widdecombe Fair", "The Nutting Girl" and "The Sweet Nightingale", as well as a number of lesser-known songs that deserve a wider circulation. For my taste, the standout performance on the tape is "Artichokes and Cauliflowers". This is a great song, and Ballantyne's performance brings it to life perfectly. Any singer who hears it will want to learn it and perform it.

"The Mullard" is a very curious piece of dialect song that deserves mention on its own. According to the notes that accompany the tape, this song has not been recorded outside of field recordings, which suggests that it is also not widely performed. My guess is that it is not widely performed *in concert*; in my experience, the song is much more fun to sing than to listen to, and I drove my family to distraction with it in the first few days after listening to this tape. I can well imagine this song being performed in the back of a pub as a test of a singer's ability to keep the lyrics straight after a few pints. It's not a great song, but it is lots of fun -- rather like a camp song for adults.

Because the songs themselves are of prime importance in unaccompanied performance, this is not a recording for casual listening. Fortunately, the performances here are more than sufficient to compel the close attention that this tape deserves. Anyone who enjoys good songs well sung will get more than their money's worth from **Pint Pot & Plough**.

*Michael Pollock*

**Daniel Koulack. Clawhammer Your Way To The Top. DK-1C. Little Giant Records. 23 Knappen Avenue, Winnipeg.**

Daniel Koulack was born in 1965. According to the notes to this cassette, he began playing banjo March 5, 1977, at 5:00 PM. There must be a mantra or star chart or something in all those fives. Whatever it is, it's good karma for Daniel and for us, as well. His banjo mentors included Mitch Podolak, Brian Ramsay, and Cathy Fink, and he's obviously listened widely and with both attention and love to the mountain banjo tradition.

He's listened to a lot of traditions, and plays in the excellent Winnipeg Klezmer group Finjan. Klezmer influences aren't hard to find on this tape, both in terms of specific modes, chord moves, and tune fragments and in improvisational abandon and rhythmic flexibility. There's also a lot of plain old New Thing jazz here, and for those of us who always thought the banjo could and should be part of that genre, but were never satisfied with the Newgrass approach to the subject, Koulack seems to be Showing The Way.

Despite the tape's title, only about half of these instrumentals feature the clawhammer/frailing style. For the remainder, Koulack, who also plays mandolin and fiddle on a few cuts, offers various three-finger styles, including some which suggest that he's been listening to some Early Music lutenists or guitarists. (Some of the reed lines have a similar sound.) The delicacy of his touch on some cuts doesn't interfere with his ability to knock down a reel at a pace that it'd take a cheetah on methedrine to dance to.

Although some of the knockdown items are reminiscent of staples from the old time repertoire (and I mean that as a compliment, not a suggestion of theft or incapacity), all the tunes here are Koulack's own, though it's hard not to suspect that several of them had heavy doses of collaboration from Koulack's sidemen, especially sax player Bill Spornitz, who's featured on the majority of titles.

This is not a Bluegrass, Newgrass, or Old Timey recording, though the spirit of the last style seems to me to characterize many items on it. Besides the saxophone and Koulack's doubles already cited, Kiney Posen (bass), and Adrian Peek (drums, miscellaneous percussion) join Koulack on many cuts, with Darryl Havers (piano and accordion) and Eli Herscovitch and Myron Schultz (clarinet) along once or twice.

My only serious complaint about the recording is that from time to time the balance, at least on my currently rather cheap (meaning I go to my Walkman for a high class listen) equipment loses the *feel* of several instances playing in ensemble. I *know* you can't make records that sound like the folks was in your living room picking (I mean, I guess I know that); my problem here is that occasionally the reeds float so high above the banjo that I almost feel like, if I were to separate the tracks, I'd decide one wasn't necessary to the other. Occasionally an instrument is buried so deeply that I'm not quite sure why it's there, an experience I've often had in pop music, and regret there -- even more is it troublesome when the music is so warm and personable as this.

I have one other complaint, but it's minor. On the liner card, very little information is given about Koulack or what the music might be like. I've heard Finjan, and that would be a recommendation, but it's not specified on the portion of the card that you can see when you lift the tape in the store. There's a sweet snapshot of Koulack (looking like the most uncool banjo player since Tom Paley in those New Lost City Rambler photos from the nooks and crannies of Greenwich Village (that's meant to be a compliment, too)), and some tantalizing (and imprecise -- *inside the card* Koulack admits one item isn't a polka) tune titles, and the acknowledgement that the card itself was printed in Canada, and, of course, the lovely album title. But I had to buy it absolutely on spec, which is a risky business in these days of fiscal frenzy.

Well, I won this gamble.

*George W. Lyon*